

TENSIONS AS A NEGRO VIEWS THEM
by: Walter D. Chambers

INTRODUCTION

At the outset I must say that a clear understanding of the title of this statement is essential to an acceptance of the spirit in which it is presented.

Putting the emphasis where it rightfully belongs - "A Negro" - it is obvious that the comments, opinions and views expressed are those of an individual. I do not and dare not speak for all Negroes or any special interests or beliefs of Negroes but can only hope to express my own - as adequately as possible. While not establishing myself as a spokesman or leader, I do have enough ego which would lead me to hope that there are many others who share my views.

Another point which must be brought out early in my remarks is the fact that I do not perceive the problems of community tensions along the lines of a dichotomy - North versus South. Rather the kind of issues which I propose to discuss are national in scope and in so many respects, even international. The backwash of what is happening in all sections of this country showers all of us to a greater rather than lesser degree. For the purposes of this discussion it might seem fitting to have this two-pronged approach, but in reality the subject matter does proceed along a continuum.

My approach to the subject will be that of defining and describing what I consider to be the tensions which exist today, the nature and source of such tensions and what has happened because of these tensions. This is a rather simple outline for what is a most complicated subject. But the task is made much easier by the dynamics of current events and the familiarity which we are to presume. Perhaps the only new dimensions to be added are my personal views and evaluations.

TENSIONS AS A NEGRO VIEWS THEM

I. WHAT ARE THE TENSIONS TODAY?

A recent poll indicated that the racial problem is the most important problem facing this country today. In previous polls international relations ranked first in a listing of the top problems. These issues, problems and situations of race relations have become the key topics for our major magazines and writers and for many of even lesser repute. It would be unthinkable for a cocktail party or after-dinner conversation to occur without race relations being the most exciting topic. This is especially true in the interracial settings. The accounts in our daily newspapers read like communiques from the many fronts of World War II. In fact, some papers place all of the race news on one or two pages with just a change in date-lines. All of these concerns are for good reason since we are living in a time of great tension - tension created by the Negro's unalterable intention to gain the rights and privileges which are guaranteed him under the Constitution of the United States.

We are all witnesses to what many have called a second American Revolution - A Negro Revolt, if you will. It is a revolt triggered by a new brand of impatience, militancy and aggressiveness. I say a "new brand" rather than a New Negro - for in my opinion there is no New Negro. Each time this description is given there is the assumption that the Negro is just now attempting to throw off the yoke of discrimination and segregation - that he is just now claiming his rights as a first class citizen - that he is finally concerned with the dignity and respect that should be the birthright of every American. A closer look at our history - mainly, the history which is omitted from the textbooks our children use - will show that the Negro has always been in a state of rebellion against the oppressions of slavery and the indignities of an inferior status in society. What is new is this all-consuming flame which has ignited the sparks in the hearts and minds of those who are determined to be free. Free to participate in the mainstream of American life without the badge or admission ticket of second-class citizenship.

In sum, this is what the Negro wants - Freedom. The same kind of individual freedom which every other American takes in with his very first breath - even before he can say much less understand the meaning of, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". The same brand of universal freedom which is sweeping Africa, Asia, South America, Latin America and Europe. The same kind of freedom which assures a man that he is not shackled by the chains of prejudice and discrimination but may participate and develop in society to the very limits of his abilities and desires. And the freedom which enables him to assume and accept the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship without compromise.

The Negro demands this full freedom now - and not at the agonizingly slow pace of a piece here and there or when the process of natural social evolution occurs.

This is the nature of the tensions today - the drive to change the piecemeal approach to the rights of one tenth of this Nation. As in the process of most social change this means a challenge to the status quo and all that it represents in society. As the stresses and strains of the pressures and resistances increase so the tensions mount. And today they have mounted to the point of explosion in many communities.

When such words and phrases as equality, dignity, respect and freedom are used to describe what this present struggle is all about, there still seems to be some question. Too often one hears the question raised, "What does the Negro really want?" "What does he mean that he does not have the same rights and privileges as any other citizen?" I think that such questions need to be answered and I wish to do it here. This can be done by briefly commenting on the sources of the tension, the points of conflict, as they exist in many communities - especially those in the North, which is the area of my personal experience.

II. SOURCES OF CONFLICT

It is difficult to submit a priority listing of the problems which face the Negro today and which require so much energy to resolve. Each community and probably many individuals would have their own special concerns. However, if we are permitted the luxury of generalizing it might be said that the whole area of employment is receiving the most critical attention in most urban centers. The issues involved are those of equality of opportunity in terms of hiring and promotion; wages and salaries and the high rate of unemployment among Negroes. The veracity and impact of these issues are carefully documented with all kinds of reports and statistics. Even the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, quoted such facts in his television speech on civil rights. In comparing the opportunities open to a Negro child as compared with those open to a white child he said:

The Negro has "one third as much chance of becoming a professional man....."

The Negro has "twice as much chance of becoming unemployed....."

The Negro has "about one seventh as much chance of earning \$10,000 a year....."

We could go on from here and quote study after study, report after report, chart after chart that spell out the distinct differential which does exist.

It can still be said that the Negro is the last hired and the first fired. Hence, the staggering rate of unemployment which compounds the problems that too many Negroes wrestle with every day. Without a job he is unable to provide decent housing, clothing and food for his family; unable to secure the extras which middle-class America accepts as necessities for good living and is unable to make a contribution toward the economic growth of his community. Further, there is the psychological damage of accepting the charity of family and friends or the relief and welfare of society. This loss of dignity and respect can sow the seeds of delinquency, crime and other expressions of anti-social behavior which do increase the tensions which we already have.

Under such circumstances it often happens that a short but vicious circle is set in motion with prejudice and discrimination being intensified.

I need not mention automation and its effects on the unskilled and semi-skilled workers of all groups, especially minority group members who make up a large percentage of this work force. This point hinges on the matter of education and training, which are other sources of tension.

But first a word must be said in answer to the question, "Is the situation really so bleak?" "Haven't Negroes made great progress in the last 10-15 years?" My general answer would be yes, but the progress has not been fast enough nor broad enough, particularly when compared with progress in the general community. There are numerous examples of break-throughs, tokenism or window-dressing in business and industries - so many of which are too little and too scarce. It is interesting to note that this tense situation of employment and discrimination persists despite and in spite of the presence of Fair Employment Practices Acts on the books of many states along with enforcement machinery. There is a feeling that this avenue of change - legislation - has been ineffective and must be cast aside for the techniques of non-violent, direct social action to secure better employment opportunities.

Another critical source of tension is the matter of public education. Again, this has been an area of concern for various groups and individuals for many years but even more so in these times. The Supreme Court decision of May 17, 1954, which declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional, began a decade in which pressures mounted for local changes. The issues range from extra-legal segregation in the South and the separate but equal philosophy to de facto segregation and racial imbalance in so many Northern school systems to the differential in standards and services based on the racial composition of schools. The shame of a Prince Edward County, Virginia, where public education has been abandoned rather than submit to desegregation, is probably the very extreme to which this issue has gone.

But we also know of such situations as New Rochelle, N. Y.; Englewood and Orange, N. J.; Malverne-Lakeview, Long Island; Chicago, Illinois and other cities which have been in and out the headlines and still others on which the glare of publicity has not shown.

It remains to be seen if the reactions of School Boards and Commissioners of Education are too little too late. I say reaction since it is a rare situation where some concrete, forthright action has been taken without the pressure of a legal suit or direct social action. Despite the handwriting on the wall the status quo is being maintained at the sacrifice of the fullest education of thousands upon thousands of minority group youngsters.

There is a realization that thousands of these students are being graduated every year, ill-equipped to be gainfully employed in the business and industrial world. Many never even reach graduation and become one of the figures added to the mounting drop-out rate. These out-of-school, unemployed youths are a great source of tension. Dr. James Conant has coined the phrase, "social dynamite", to describe them.

The relationship of education and employment in this discussion is too obvious for much more comment. It does not take any detailed study or research program for people in the general community to realize the significance and importance of this relationship. Most Negro parents, as any other parents, want their children to get the very best education possible and then receive an equal opportunity to apply this education to the highest limits of their training and ability.

The desire to secure the very best available also extends itself to the field of housing. Some consider this to be the most critical source of tension -- discrimination in housing. It is said to be the last and highest hurdle to clear in this race for equality. What happens when a Negro goes house-shopping? Can he buy or rent wherever he may choose? What factors operate to restrict his selections? What are community reactions to the first minority group move-ins? What about the housing conditions and premium rents which minority group families must endure?

The answers to these questions spell out the circumstances which enable a community to maintain its restrictive housing patterns, its homogenous neighborhoods and ghettos, be they the lower socio-economic, racial and ethnic ghettos, or the middle class and gilded variety. A break-through the barriers and restrictions in many communities have resulted in serious violent explosions. In spite of the stringent laws against discrimination in public, semi-public and private housing and various federal orders and directives, this is a problem which is still upon us, without much immediate relief in sight.

I could continue to list what I deem the key areas in which tension is most serious but this would only belabor the point. Suffice it to say that the three areas already mentioned -- employment, education and housing -- would probably be included on the list of many other Negroes. There is one other area which I wish to briefly review. Actually this area is more the effect of the tensions mentioned above rather than a source in itself. But the inclusion of these thoughts within the context of this discussion does seem germane. I refer to the frustration and aggression which have been the by-products of prejudice and discrimination -- the psychological damage which centuries of indignity and disrespect have inflicted on a group of people.

I speak particularly of how a parent prepares his child for the bitterness, the hostility, the injustice, the inconvenience of prejudice and discrimination. How can a parent assure the child of his dignity and worth as an individual when so many of life's experiences chip away this very dignity and worth? What words are most effective in healing the bruises which are sure to come?

Further, I think of those who have thrown in the towel, so to speak, and put their faith in the preachments and promises of the Black Muslims. Their solutions, their answers to the problems - separateness - is the very antithesis of what today's struggle is all about. The Muslims have been in print a great deal lately but I really do not think they pose a serious threat to the situation today. For one reason, there have always been such extremist groups, the most famous of which was the Garvey Movement, a forerunner of the Muslims. They have all passed on without having a serious effect on existing circumstances. Another reason, is the fact that out of 20 million Negroes in the United States, the very highest estimates indicate that possibly 100,000 are members of the Black Muslims.

While the group is not large in actual membership the number of sympathizers is of some significance. The conditions which lead any number of individuals, and especially our young people, to this path of protest is serious enough. Why this way and not some other shows the extreme frustrations which these persons feel or experience. Eliminating the sources of these frustrations will go a long way toward neutralizing the appeals of such groups as the Muslims.

III. THE NEGRO REVOLT - WHY NOW?

The question has often been raised as to why, at this particular time, have the tensions increased to the boiling point of the present revolution? Why not ten years ago, or five years from now? Why now? If I were asked to give my answer in one sentence I would say, "The cup of patience doth runneth over."

Earlier I mentioned that this impatience and challenge to the status quo are not new. The difference between then and now is the unified front and universality of this revolution. It must be characterized as a peaceful revolution with the concept of non-violence being the basic philosophy.

In answering this question, "Why now,?" efforts have been made to pinpoint a date and sometimes place as to when and where the revolution began. At best, I believe it can be said the combination of many factors accounts for the "now" of this rebellion. It has been said that the 1954 Supreme Court Decision on public education precipitated the present demands for changes in all areas of life. It has been further suggested that the after-effects of World War II and what this battle for the survival of democracy meant to all Americans is significant. The emergence of Africa is listed as another of these factors. To some extent increased education and the development of determined and courageous leaders is important.

I feel that every credit for this "new" climate, this emerging militancy, can be attributed to the consistent and persistent battles and victories which were won by Negro leaders and organizations through legal pressures, at the conference tables and in some cases, by direct action over many years. I would say that the "now" of which we speak today was made possible by these highly venerated organizations with their competent staffs and loyal supporters. They have engineered the social changes that produced the climate in which the seeds of today's revolt have flourished.

In short, I would say that the conditions of the past and the gains of the present have motivated the protests, demands and impatience of what is now called the New Negro.

I need not elaborate upon the way in which these protests, demands and impatience are expressed today. Most people of the world are aware of the picketing, sit-ins, kneel-ins, wade-ins, boycotts and other demonstrations that have been utilized as the weapons of the revolution. I would also hope that people realize that the employment of such tactics usually means a breakdown in the more traditional forms of resolving these problems which create the community tensions.

It is sad thought, but I believe true, that it often takes such drastic measures to shake the apathy and recalcitrance which pervade the power structure and general community when faced with problems of civil rights. And much has been said about the power structure of many communities. The general charge is that there has been too much defensive reaction rather than positive action when confronting these crucial issues. Happily, there are recent instances where responsibility and leadership have been demonstrated by these pillars of the community. If we are to meet the challenges of change, if we are to reduce the tensions, if we are to guarantee the rights of all, there needs to be a spirit of communication and cooperation among those in the executive suites and those who walk the picket lines and all the other citizens of good-will and understanding who can be mustered.

THE FUTURE

To answer the questions of are we travelling the right path? Are we making progress? Will we reduce and eliminate the sources of tension?, I would say categorically, yes. Yes, I feel that the conditions and circumstances which serve as the battle-cry of the Revolution of '63 will be resolved and in quick order. And all this will be achieved without the violence which many consider inevitable. Perhaps my optimism is tempered by the fact that I feel that this resolution must be accomplished. All that this democracy stands for is at stake for we are not really concerned with the Negro problem but an American dilemma.

I am convinced, though, that the flood waters will not recede until we are able to put more than a finger in the dike.

The many organizations and agencies which are not on the firing line also have important roles to assume in this struggle. There is certainly room for the various resources, skills and programs of all interested groups for all levels of society must be reached and served. I do not believe that any individual or group has devised and executed the answers and approaches to all the problems, major and minor, with which we are concerned. All can be committed to this struggle for justice, freedom and the human rights of every man, woman and child.

I am positive that we will pass through these critical times and find that the tensions of today have finally added real meaning to those oft repeated words: ~~.....~~ "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

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